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ABSTRACT

Teens Talk is a project conducted to develop peer leadership among pregnant/parenting teens (both male and female) by participation in panels. After training, the panels present information as well as experiences and attitudes to adult community groups to raise awareness and support, to youth groups to prevent teen pregnancy, and to other pregnant/parenting teens for whatever is needed at the time. This Learning Guide contains information on forming new teen panels in rural communities in New Mexico. Emphasis is on ingredients that make a panel function well, given the cultural differences, geographic distances, and rural and isolated nature of many New Mexico communities. The Learning Guide serves as a tool for adult facilitators who wish to use a teen panel to facilitate peer leadership among pregnant/parenting teens or to get information to other groups. Sections cover: (1) reasons for the panel format; (2) advantages of the panel over the support group; (3) steps in setting up Teens Talk programs; and (4) considerations in working with pregnant and parenting teens. Eleven additional resources are listed. (ALL)

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Learning Guide for New Mexico TEENS TALK

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Overall Project: TEENS TALK

TEENS TALK is a project to develop peer leadership among pregnant/parenting teens (both male and female) by having them participate in panels. The purpose of the panels, once developed and trained, is to present information as well as experiences and attitudes to adult community groups to raise awareness and support, to youth groups to prevent teen pregnancy, and to other pregnant/parenting teens for whatever is needed at the time.

TEENS TALK has been a project of NMOAPP (the New Mexico Organization on Adolescent Pregnancy and Parenting) during the 1988-89 program year. It will continue and be expanded in 1989-90. In the past year, there were active sites in the Bernalillo and Silver City areas. Funding for on-site activities came primarily from the Albuquerque Community Foundation and Church Women United International. Financial support for the preparation of the **Learning Guide** was provided by the Adolescent Health Program of the NM Health and Environment Department.

What the Learning Guide is

The **Learning Guide** is written to help form and develop new teen panels in New Mexico outside of Albuquerque, that is, not in a major metropolitan area. The emphasis is on ingredients to make a panel function well and the variations important because of cultural differences, geographic distances, and the rural and isolated nature of many New Mexico communities.

From NMOAPP's work with **TEENS TALK** in 1988-89, it seems that it is not the curricula and materials to train teens that are lacking but a guide for adult facilitators who want to use teen

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[1] Help with this report was given by several members of the NMOAPP Board and Advisory Committee. Copies can be obtained from NMOAPP at P.O. Box 35997, Albuquerque, New Mexico 87110.

[2] Preparation of the Learning Guide has been funded by the Adolescent Health Program in the Maternal-Child Health Bureau of the Public Health Division of the NM Health and Environment Department.

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panels as a tool. Roadblocks need to be identified before one can successfully implement a training program. The **Learning Guide**, therefore, exists for adults who wish to use a teen panel as a tool either to facilitate peer leadership among pregnant/parenting teens or to get information to other groups.

Why the Panel Format

The panel format was chosen as an effective response to the combined needs of various groups for information about adolescent pregnancy (care and prevention) and of the pregnant/parenting teens themselves. The choice was based on the following assumptions and generalizations:

1. teens "hear" better from their age-peers than from adults;
2. chances are increased that that information or experiences presented by a members of a group, rather than one individual, will fit the hearer;
3. adults understand more readily when consumers (or survivors) talk;
4. pregnant/parenting teens can benefit from being seen as experts at something society considers positive, e.g., knowing about the hard realities of teen parenthood;
5. effective work with pregnant and parenting teens often must counteract their isolation and alienation;
6. being part of a group performance is easier than being on one's own.

The panel format allows leadership by pregnant/parenting teens. A panel might address issues of age-peers or younger about "prevention", of their peers in terms of experience about information needed by young parents, and of their peers' parents and community (consciousness raising).

It is important to note that a panel directed toward the hard realities of teen pregnancy/parenting is not always appropriate to the needs of pregnant/parenting teens. Some teens, especially until several months after the birth of the baby, see only positive aspects of the situation: now they will have someone to love them; or now there is a reason for boyfriend and girlfriend to be committed. We learned about the denial of difficulty and lost teen pleasures by girls who are parenting and still trying to make the relationship with their boyfriend be satisfactory. Other teens face situations where they have to make hard decisions about abortion or family punishment and want a place where they are safe, which is rarely a public forum. It seemed to the NMOAPP social worker that some teens had been so abused and neglected themselves that they were unable to reach out to any form of help. We also had to become aware of cultural ways when Native Americans students began to mistrust the person who asked them to carry out public but personal verbal discussions.

"Support group" vs. "panel"

For many of the teens discussed in the paragraph above, an individual counselor or a support group is the form of help needed. There are cases, however, when teens want to be part of a panel. The question can be asked, "Must there be some form of a support group before a teen panel can be formed?"

At the Adolescent Family Life Program in Las Cruces, at New Futures School in Albuquerque, and at AWARE in Carlsbad, there are active and happy members of teen panels. One thing that contributes to the success of panels there seems to be the fact that acknowledgment and support of teen parents already exist openly. A teen is in the program because he/she is pregnant or parenting.

The experience at a youth program in Vermont (see references) was that many young parents did not want to be associated with a "support group" but welcomed the opportunity to participate with others in a panel. Gradually the panel and preparation for it took on many of the functions of support.

Steps in setting up TEENS TALK programs

1. Decide the social and geographic area to be drawn from (such as what the high school draws from, what area the public health nurse covers, or what youth projects can be enlisted).

2. What is the area like in terms of the following? Decide how will you cope with potential problems (listed in parentheses).

special subgroups being present (problems of different and maybe conflicting belief systems about too-early pregnancy and parenting or of approaches to life);

how teens and their parents support themselves financially (are there going to be problems with child care);

geographic distances and sparseness of population (problems with transportation);

the absolute number of pregnant and parenting teens (will there be enough or too many for the program? are you willing to include both females and males?).

2. Consider the realistic options of which institutions and/or adult facilitators might be involved both in terms of their time, funds and willingness and of their meaning to the teen parents for privacy and comfort (e.g., did most of the kids drop out of school before they were pregnant; therefore, are school and school personnel uncomfortable for them). Trust is an essential element in making the panel successful.

3. Decide what institution and/or person(s) in that area are to be at the center of the program (e.g. a two-community effort with the joint work of the home ec teacher of one high school and

school nurse of the other). Two adult leaders who are complementary often make the work much easier. Before creating a leadership team, however, learn about possible conflicts:

what the restrictions are that each leader must work within, such as hours available, amount of time, and other duties;

what the personalities and 'territories' are of each leader.

4. Decide on the role of "support" as discussed above on page 3.

5. Decide about the recruitment of teens:

who should be invited to participate (e.g., anyone who is interested after seeing a panel presentation or only girls three months after giving birth, "when reality hits");

who will do the recruiting and how? Some methods are

involved teens asking others;

adult worker who knows the whole group asking individuals when she senses they are 'ready';

announcing over the school system that a special class is about to happen;

asking the classroom teachers individually to excuse participants;

a teacher or nurse known to the potential participant inviting her/him to a panel session.

Should the participants (and could they realistically) receive stipends as well as mileage and baby sitting money if required?

6. Set up meetings with adult colleagues to discuss progress or feelings of defeat. Discuss the issues also with others who have tried to set up such programs before or who have a different perspective on the community. The roadblocks, denial and conflicting needs NMOAPP experienced this past year seemed to make our projects impossible at times.

Considerations in working with pregnant and parenting teens

Pregnant and parenting teens may have all the difficulties and pleasures of most adolescents. In addition, these young people are at high risk for many other difficulties, often ones that helped bring about the too-early pregnancy. In addition, many have a child to care for and must be absent when the baby is ill or fretting. If the teens are in school, it is wise to determine school policy on absences, e.g., if a particular girl cannot leave campus because she has been absent too much or has

not made up her work.

Low self-esteem is something that those of us who have worked with teens at risk of social ills know all too well, yet it is very difficult to be precise about what "low self esteem" is and how to measure it or know that we have done something to raise it. One reason for having a panel is that it seems to raise self esteem. Dr. Irene Blanchard of Lyndonville, Vermont, is preparing a paper on evaluation of the effects of teen panels on the panelists. Low self esteem is one reason to pay stipends, paying for the expertise of the girls on the experience they have had (and its common in the U.S. to pay for expertise).

Pregnant/parenting teens are not always appropriate for or anxious to be part of panel presentations. (Please refer to the paragraph on this subject on page 3 above.) It is also true, however, that panels can be helpful. One girl in Vermont described the panel as a chance to get out of the darkness in yourself.

Additional Resources

Most of the resources listed below relate to leadership in the form of peer panels for pregnant and parenting teens. The results of a library search and many peoples' experience indicate that little on such subjects has been published in books and journals.

Relative to information about peer panels, materials about many different subjects abound that might be used with or are about pregnant and parenting teens in New Mexico. A few are listed below. In addition, discussion is available with personnel from programs such as Women, Infant, Children (WIC) and the Indian Health service about such issues as the realities of nutrition among teen mothers who are Native American.

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Di Cindio, Linda A. et al. "Race Effects in a Model of Parent-Peer Orientation." **Adolescence** 18 (70), 369-79, 1983.

Dover, Carwin, Joye B. Kohl, Barbara L. Boik, and Cecilia Gallagher. ***Parents & Adolescents Can Talk: Peer Facilitator***

Training. Bozeman, MT: Dept. of Home Economics, Montana State University, 1987.

Griffin, Bonnie. Phone conversation about pregnant and parenting teen panel in St. Johnsbury, VT. Family Resources Project, Northeast Kingdom Youth Services, Railroad St., St Johnsbury, VT 05819.

Hendricks, Leo E., and Teresa A. Montgomery. "Teenage Pregnancy from a Black Perspective: Some Reflections on Its Prevention.": Occational paper #24. Washington DC: Inst. for Urban Affairs and Research, Howard Univ. 1986. ERIC No. ED 278 749.

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